

Robert Kennedy Reportedly OK'd Sugar Lobby Wiretaps in 1961

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Washington — Within months of his becoming attorney general in 1961, the late Robert Kennedy authorized the Federal Bureau of Investigation to use wiretaps in a wide-ranging investigation of sugar lobbying in Washington on behalf of the Dominican Republic and other countries, according to information developed by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Among six individuals whose telephones were tapped during the investigation was Christine Gallagher, then chief clerk of the House Agriculture Committee and secretary to that committee's chairman, the late Rep. Harold Cooley, D-N.C., say sources close to the committee investigation.

At the time, the United States had cut off imports of sugar from the Dominican Republic and that country's leader, Gen. Rafael Trujillo, was attempting to get his sugar quota reinstated through the intercession of American lobbyists.

Under the U.S. Sugar Act, Congress set quotas limiting the amount of sugar each foreign country could supply to the United States went for double the world price. Most countries hired lobbyists to press for a quota from Congress and Chairman Cooley exercised almost total control over how much each country received.

As pieced together from committee sources, former FBI officials and others close to the investigation, the wiretapping developed as follows.

Kennedy's initial concern with Cooley, stemmed from an article on sugar lobbying which appeared in The Reporter magazine. Using that as his basis,

Kennedy called on the FBI to carry out a thorough investigation.

The then-director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, suggested wiretaps. Over the course of the next year, wiretaps were proposed by the FBI and authorized by Kennedy on two still unnamed lobbyists for foreign sugar interests and three officials of the Agriculture Department.

Among the latter was Lawrence Myers who at the time was director of the Sugar Division. In that position, Myers was contacted by lobbyists for various countries who sought his support for a quota.

The investigation went on for more than a year, but never produced an indictment.

The Senate Intelligence Committee is investigating the sugar wiretaps because they raised the possibility that the FBI was being used to gather political information on Congress rather than for investigative purposes.

A former FBI official said Friday these

wiretaps were handled by the bureau's domestic intelligence division, the same division that handled national security wiretaps, and not the division that handled criminal matters.

During earlier testimony before the Senate committee, a staff report disclosed that wiretaps and physical surveillances were carried on by the FBI at the request of all presidents since Franklin Roosevelt.

The Kennedy Administration, the committee report said, Attorney General Kennedy authorized wiretaps of two reporters — Lloyd Norman of Newsweek in mid-1961 and Hanson Baldwin of The New York Times in 1962. Both taps to track down leaks were limited to 30 days by the attorney general according to a former FBI official.

The Kennedy Administration taps of reporters were handled as domestic intelligence investigations and filed in the bureau's normal fashion, according to committee sources.